UK teachers oppose attacks on working conditions

Ioan Petrescu
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UK schools are under immense pressure due to the devastating spread of COVID-19, with the Johnson government insisting that all learning must happen in person with no mitigations in place. Teachers are also facing attacks on their pay and conditions, the further marketisation of education, and victimisations. This has provoked industrial action by teachers over recent months.

Oaks Park High School, Newbury Park, Ilford

National Education Union (NEU) members at Oaks Park High School in Ilford plan to continue striking in a long-running dispute, ongoing since June, with staff fighting to defend colleagues victimised for upholding their rights to a safe workplace during the coronavirus pandemic.

The dispute started when staff were told to come into school during the national lockdown in January this year. Under conditions of a rampant spread of the virus through schools, 26 workers invoked their rights under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act to remove themselves from danger and teach online.

The school's management responded by firing four of the teachers involved, among them a newly elected union rep, who was frog-marched out of the school.

The National Education Union (NEU) has limited action so far to protests in front of the school or outside the meetings of Redbridge London Borough Council's cabinet. The appeals to the Labour Party-run local council have proven completely useless, as the council authority said it was satisfied the school's actions had not been motivated by requests to work offsite made under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act and thus the dismissals were completely legal. Venda Premkumar, district secretary for Redbridge NEU, said at least 12 more days of strikes were planned.

As winter is fast approaching, and with it a new surge of the virus poised to spread through schools, teachers will have to fight again for their right to perform their jobs safely, from home. The NEU secretary did not address that at all, insisting that the demands of staff are limited to the council reinstating the NEU representative and conducting an independent investigation.

Swinton Co-op Academy, Salford

Teachers at the Swinton Co-op Academy school in Salford, Greater Manchester, continued their strike last month, walking out from Tuesday to Thursday every week. The 30 members of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) oppose excessive working hours, shorter lunch breaks, the elimination of pastoral care time and management's imposition of practices relating to performance management.

Parents are backing the teachers, launching a petition signed by 295 against "unfair" and "intimidating" school rules brought in by new management. Each morning children line up and have their bags searched to check they have the correct equipment. Parents complain about short lunch breaks, not enough toilet breaks, and officious footwear rules. The NASUWT is leading the strike into a dead end. It has mobilised none of its roughly 300,000 members nationally in support of

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the academy staff. While the teachers have been out on strike, the union has engaged in negotiations with management, trying to figure out a way to defuse the conflict, while pushing through most of the Trust's demands.

Despite this, management remains intransigent, claiming the increased workload is a result of pupils having to "catch-up" on their studies, after the time they have missed schools, because of the pandemic. The Trust's disdain for workers is shown by one of its recent statements calling teachers "unreasonable" for daring to take industrial action because they "may have had more 'free time' historically".

The three-day strike pattern was supposed to continue during the coming month. However, on November 9, the union abruptly cancelled imminent strike action one day before it was supposed to begin. It stated that "sufficient progress has been made to enable notified strike action to be suspended for the weeks commencing 8 and 15 November." Strikes days on November 10, 11, 16, 17 and 18 were withdrawn with the union saying, "Further meetings are planned to work towards an agreed resolution." As usual the NASUWT has not deigned to inform its members what it has agreed to.

St. Matthew's Church of England Primary School, Preston

Staff at St. Matthew's Church of England Primary School in Preston, Lancashire have come out against plans for the school to join the Cidari academy trust, which is operated by the Diocese of Blackburn. Workers say that the plans have not been the subject of "meaningful" discussion, either with them or the parents of children attending the school. The *Lancashire Post* has seen a letter sent to governors signed by more than 40 staff, saying they had been given the impression that academy conversion was "a 'done deal'; not a case of 'if' but 'when'—and that it is 'better to jump than be pushed'."

It continued: "We now know, thanks to the support and intervention of our trade unions… that this is absolutely not the case—and, as such, we strongly disagree with the proposed academisation of St Matthew's."

Despite a response from chair of governors James Atkinson highlighting supposed "progress" made by current Cidari Academies since joining the trust, St. Matthew's staff voted against the school's conversion in an indicative ballot at the end of October. The vote to oppose academy conversion was unanimous on a 79 percent turnout.

The school responded by extending the consultation period by another month, until November 26, but still plans to go ahead with the conversion. Under pressure from the staff, the local branch of the NEU has agreed to ballot members for industrial action. However, the NEU is only planning on taking "discontinuous industrial action", meaning any future walkout would take place on a series of individual days, with normal working in between to lessen the impact on the school.

The academisation of schools was first introduced under Tony Blair's 1997-2007 Labour government. A half-way house to the privatisation of education, academies are publicly financed but privately run and are exempt from teachers' national pay and conditions agreements.

The introduction of academies has gone hand in hand with performance management, a system in which automatic annual increments linked to experience became dependent on teachers fulfilling targets. Not meeting these targets became a pretext for turning schools into academies, together with ripping up staff pay and conditions. Underperformance is not a consequence of poor teaching, however, but of decades of cuts to education spending and entrenched socio-economic inequality.

We urge all educators, parents, and students to sign up for the Educators Newsletter and join and participate in upcoming meetings of the UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

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